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Who was Father Joseph Muzquiz?

An interview with historian John Coverdale about Father Joseph Muzquiz, whose cause of canonization was opened in Boston by Cardinal Sean O'Malley.

07/13/2017

Father Joseph, one of the early members of Opus Dei, helped start its apostolic work in the United States. He died in Boston 34 years ago, on June 21, 1983. John Coverdale is the author of several books about the

history of Opus Dei, including
“Putting Down Roots: Fr. Joseph
Muzquiz and the Growth of Opus
Dei.”

Who was Father Joseph Muzquiz?

Father Joseph was the first priest of Opus Dei to come to the United States and he was also one of the first three priests ordained for Opus Dei. He played a key role in the development of Opus Dei, both in this country and in quite a few other countries around the world.

In addition, he was a remarkable human being and very close to God. He was quite a talented man, very intelligent and good humored, but someone who took all of that talent and put it completely at the service of what he understood God was asking him.

All the saints try to put their talents at the service of God. What stood out about Father Joseph?

On the one hand, Father Joseph lived the spirit of Opus Dei, the spirit of Saint Josemaria, which leads people to seek sanctity in the ordinary things of everyday life. In that sense he was not different from other members of Opus Dei. Perhaps he did so with more generosity and greater fervor than most, but he wasn't doing anything unusual in that sense. From a more personal point of view, I think Father Joseph's two major characteristics were, one, his extraordinary diligence, a spirit of hard work, the capacity to get an enormous amount done, and at the same time, a very obvious real concern for each person around him, an affection for the people he came to know, and a real dedication to helping them.

In your book you talk about his first meeting with Opus Dei's founder. Could you describe that meeting?

He was a student, probably about year away from finishing his degree in engineering, and a friend invited him to meet this young priest, Saint Josemaria Escriva. Father Joseph says that he went partly out of simple courtesy, partly out of a certain curiosity. There was a certain amount of buzz in Madrid at the time about this young priest. But he went without any special expectations. He was quite swept off his feet, particularly when only a few minutes into his conversation with Saint Josemaria, he heard the words "there is no greater love than Love itself." He later said, I knew lots of priests, but nobody ever talked to me like that before.

Tell us about Father Joseph later joining Opus Dei. What happened and

what were some of the challenges he and others faced?

His joining Opus Dei was considerably delayed by the Spanish Civil War. He got to know Saint Josemaria very early in 1935 or late 1934, around Christmas time. And he began attending classes and getting spiritual direction and seeing Saint Josemaria. When the Spanish Civil war broke out, he lost contact with both St Josemaria and the other members of Opus Dei for well over a year, and didn't actually join Opus Dei until shortly after the Civil War ended in early 1940.

I think a key element in his decision was the fact that Saint Josemaria survived the brutal persecution of priests in Madrid and managed eventually to escape Madrid and cross the Pyrenees to get to the other part of Spain where priests were not being persecuted. He saw that as

providential, and it was important for his conviction that Opus Dei was something God desired and that God wanted him to be a part of it.

When Father Joseph began studying for the priesthood, it wasn't even clear how, under Church law, it would be possible for him to be ordained. What was the obstacle?

Well, the difficulty was finding a place in the legal frameworks that existed then in the Church to be able to have priests ordained. The Church is very particular about priests. It is not enough for someone to say, I would like to become a priest. You have to be called by someone who has the authority to do that, typically a diocesan bishop or the head of a religious order. Obviously, Opus Dei is not a diocese, and neither is it a religious order. The core of the spirituality of the religious orders is the idea of rejecting or renouncing

the world in order to give testimony of its passing character. But the spirituality of Opus Dei is sanctifying oneself in the world in ordinary circumstances. So Opus Dei could not fit into either of the two forms that the Church recognized as having the right to call people to the priesthood. Saint Josemaria was convinced that Opus Dei was meant to have priests, that they were necessary, but he didn't know how it could be done. Nonetheless, he was so convinced it would happen that he asked Father Joseph and several others of the early members of Opus Dei if they were willing to be ordained. They said yes, and began to study for the priesthood, based on the strength of their conviction that somehow this would work out.

What was it like for Father Joseph when in 1949 when he came to start Opus Dei in the United States?

It was very difficult. Neither of them, Father Joseph and Sal Ferigle, who came with him from Spain, knew much English. They literally had almost no money; they knew almost no one, and even more important, the environment among Catholics in the United States was very much that if you felt some special calling, if you wanted to serve God in a special way, you should become a priest or a nun. The idea of seriously seeking sanctity in the middle of the world in the midst of one's profession struck many people as crazy. There were many obstacles, but Father Joseph and the others were undaunted by that. They had such firm faith that Opus Dei was God's work that they were convinced that, despite the obstacles, it would go forward.

What was it like for Father Joseph coming here knowing little English?

Well, shortly after they arrived they received a letter from the founder, Saint Josemaria, who in passing said: I assume by now you are speaking in English to each other. And Father Sal reports from that day on Father Joseph never spoke to him in Spanish unless there was a third party who didn't know English. And I imagine some of those conversations must have been pretty funny, because neither of them knew much English or had great facility for languages.

Father Joseph arrived in Chicago with almost no money, but he quickly managed to start a student residence. How did he do that?

Father Joseph had iron-clad faith that what God wanted would happen. He also a great deal of daring, a willingness to climb out on a limb and ask people to help. A real estate agent showed them a large house quite near the campus of the

University of Chicago which would be suitable for a residence. The agent was so impressed with his faith and trust in God that he donated his commission as a down payment for the house. And Father Joseph did that another three or four times, buying houses with almost no money.

Tell me about Richard Riemann, the first American vocation for Opus Dei.

Richard Riemann was the first person to join and persevere in Opus Dei in the United States. He was working in Chicago, and there was a fair on the Chicago lakefront about the history of transportation, and he had a job as the head of the mounted units – all the stagecoaches and the horsemen and the pony express. A priest there suggested he meet Father Joseph, and so Dick called him up, went to meet him, and mentioned he was interested in making a retreat. Father Joseph said, let's have a

retreat. Dick Riemann told him the only problem is that I am working seven days a week. Father Joseph was not put off by a small problem like that, and so he said, instead of going home at night, come and sleep here, and in the morning we will have Mass, prayer, and breakfast. Dick did that for a few days, decided to move into the residence, and after a month or two, he became convinced God was calling him to join Opus Dei.

Besides the United States, where else did Father Joseph carry out his apostolic work?

Father Joseph was very instrumental in the beginning of Opus Dei in the United States, Canada, Japan, and also Switzerland.

What to me is remarkable is that when he was in his 50s (he had been working so hard that he was tired and worn out) Saint Josemaria asked

him to return to Spain and become the chaplain of a conference center Opus Dei has outside of Seville, in the south of Spain. And he cheerfully took on that relatively humble job, when pretty much all of his adult life he had been someone quite important in Opus Dei. And now there he was as a chaplain at a conference center in the middle of nowhere. But Father Joseph threw himself entirely into doing apostolate with all sorts of people – with great landowners, and at the same, with gypsy girls whose families didn't have two nickels to rub together. He was very active with the people at a large American military base, called Rota, including the Protestant chaplains. He did a huge amount of work getting to know the diocesan priests in the area. One year, around Christmas time, he wrote to Saint Josemaria saying he had seen approximately a hundred priests in the previous few weeks. And this was

an area where the priests were scattered around, one priest in each little village, often with very bad roads. He had gone from one town to another to greet the priests for Christmas.

Tell me about the day Father Joseph died.

He was living in Boston at the time, as chaplain of an Opus Dei center, but on the day he died he was at an Opus Dei conference center outside Boston, called Arnold Hall. He was there as chaplain to a course of young women studying theology. One morning he was teaching class, and he began to feel ill. He excused himself, went to his room, returned to teach class again, didn't feel up to it, and excused himself again. One of the women attending classes was a physician said he didn't look good. Father Joseph was driven over to a doctor who had an office nearby. At

first Father Joseph was very upbeat, asking how the doctor's wife and family were doing. And the doctor did an electrocardiogram, and at first didn't believe the result, and thought there was something wrong with the machine. The second time he said, you are having a massive heart attack. They got him into an ambulance. Even then he was joking, telling the ambulance driver, hey, this is a great ride. In the hospital they stabilized him. But sometime around two in the morning, he had another massive heart attack, and died shortly after.

Did you ever meet Father Joseph?

I met Father Joseph shortly after I first came in contact with Opus Dei, more than 50 years ago now. I had meetings with him fairly frequently over the years. He was obviously a holy, good humored, very smart person.

What was it like knowing that someone you know has had his cause of canonization opened?

It's truly quite marvelous. I've been blessed and privileged to have had this happen a number of times. I worked fairly closely with Saint Josemaria, so I not only saw his cause opened, but I was present at his canonization in Rome by Pope John Paul II. I also was reasonably close to his immediate successor, Alvaro del Portillo, who has now been beatified. So Father Joseph is at least the third person I know, but it doesn't fail to be a thrill to say, my goodness, someone I knew and who knows me and will pray for me – that the Church is investigating to see if this person should be declared a saint is quite remarkable.

Prayer for Father Joseph Muzquiz's intercession

You can learn more about Father Joseph Muzquiz and Opus Dei in the US here.

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